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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: "A JUST RUSSIA": DIFFICULT BEGINNING, UNCERTAIN
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[1](#)B. MOSCOW 12498
[1](#)C. MOSCOW 12708
[1](#)D. ST. PETERSBURG 00729
[1](#)E. YEKATERINBURG 00405

Classified By: Pol M/C Alice G. Wells for reason 1.4(b).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Spravedlivaya Rossiya (SR) (&A Just Russia8), often referred to as the &second8 Kremlin party, has been officially registered. The party has moved to constitute itself at the federal and local levels, by combining elements of its constituent parties --Rodina, the Russian Party of Life, and the Russian Party of Pensioners-- and by casting itself as a left-leaning alternative to United Russia (YR). Presidium Secretary Aleksandr Babakov downplayed to us reported difficulties in uniting the parties in the regions, criticized YR's lack of a legislative agenda, but reiterated that SR would support for President the candidate best able to continue Putin's policies. The rise of SR is seen here as "managed democracy," injecting officially-sanctioned competition into the electoral process, while maintaining loyalty to Putin. Pollsters record a positive reception to SR, and analysts predict a credible showing in the March regional elections. While the party talks about ideology, most believe that its rivalry with YR is part of a larger struggle for power and not an argument about ideas. End summary.

Step Forward: Party Registration

[1](#)2. (U) The Russian Federal Registration Service officially registered SR as a political party on November 28. SR,s Presidium Secretary Aleksandr Babakov used the announcement of the registration to reaffirm the commitment of SR,s three constituent parties --Rodina, the Russian Party of Life (RPL), and the Russian Party of Pensioners (RPP) -- to participate as a united force in the 2007 regional and State Duma elections.

Win-Win-Win

[1](#)3. (C) According to independent political analyst and RPL insider Aleksandr Morozov, all three of the founding parties benefited from the creation of SR. RPL is first among equals, because its Chairman Sergey Mironov had long proposed the idea of creating a viable, multi-party system. Per

Morozov, with the departure of Rodina founder Rogozin, Rodina's influence was destined to diminish over time. Morozov thought Babakov was aware of that inevitability, and seized the proposed merger as a way to salvage Rodina. The Russian Party of Pensioners (RPP) was in a different position, Morozov said. The RPP was growing in the regions, but its strength was also its weakness: it could attract pensioners, but few others, and as a result was destined to play a minor role at the federal level. With the merger, each party was awarded an important leadership position and, according to Morozov, the synergies created should lead SR to greater overall success in the upcoming elections.

Growing Pains: Merging Apparatchiks

14. (C) Following registration, the SR leadership immediately began consolidating responsibilities at the federal and regional levels. Mironov was chosen to head SR. Babakov will chair the party presidium; and Igor Zotov, former leader of the Russian Party of Pensioners, was named Secretary of the Central Council. Of the three, Mironov is the best known. He is a staunch Putin supporter, who has been at pains since the merger to stress that SR supports the President, but opposes YR. A few contacts see Mironov as an effective public official, known for his ability to reach out to all levels of society and for his loyalty to his friends. Others question his political acuity. Kremlin watcher and Director of the Institute for Applied Politics Olga Kryshchanovskaya called Mironov an "idiot" in a recent conversation, and said he lacked leadership potential. Dmitriy Oreshkin, President of the public relations firm Mercator Group, believed Mironov lacked talent, but thought his &siloviki8 supporters in the

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Kremlin might work around the Mironov to make the party into a viable alternative to YR. Rodina's Babakov is described as smart and possessed of a keen business sense. Zotov on the other hand is known as a technocrat. Babakov and Zotov were elevated within their respective parties after their charismatic leaders, Dmitriy Rogozin and Valery Gartung ran afoul of the Kremlin in spring/summer 2006.

15. (C) SR's swift registration occurred in the face of continuing widespread conflict among the three parties at the regional level, and dissent among some in Rodina at the national level. In a December 6 meeting, Babakov told visiting EUR/RUS Director Warlick that there were no "cardinal differences" among the constituent parties, just "political ambitions" in the regions that have resulted in "technical difficulties" but no insurmountable barriers. Mironov has termed the friction natural and guessed that no more than 7 to 10 percent of members of the three parties will leave SR as a result of the merger. Mironov predicted that by early 2007, SR will have more members on its roles than the three organizations had prior to their merger. Babakov agreed, predicting to us that SR would quickly have one-half million members.

16. (SBU) This may be easier said than done. Recent media reports tell of scandals in the regions as the local party branches consolidate, based on the relative strength of RPL, Rodina and RPP in each region. Examples:

-- at SR's founding session, some members of the St. Petersburg Rodina faction, lead by Duma Deputy Yuriy Savelyev, chose not to join SR;

-- in Tatarstan, inter-party problems have preceded announcements of the merger, and reportedly have only intensified since;

-- the media report that two, competing SR regional party conferences were held in Voronezh over the Dec 2-3 weekend;

-- initial attempts to create a unified regional branch of SR in Sverdlovsk have proven unsuccessful due to "bad blood" between local Rodina and RPL leaders (ref e);

-- the Nizhniy Novgorod SR unification conference, scheduled for December 7, was postponed because the groups reportedly were unable to reach agreements within their individual constituencies regarding their respective candidates for regional leadership.

SR's Choice for President

¶8. (C) Babakov sidestepped the question of whether SR would field its own presidential candidate or support Putin's choice. Key to its decision would be its performance in the 2007 Duma elections. On the one hand, Babakov said, there was no reason, given the President's 70 percent approval rating, to reject his candidate. On the other hand, the party would in the end back the candidate who would ensure the continuation of Putin's policies.

What Makes &A Just Russia8 Different?

¶9. (SBU) In contrast to YR, which SR criticized for lacking a political ideology beyond supporting Putin, SR combines three parties that have tried, with varying degrees of success, to carve out ideological niches and to develop constituencies. Many of SR,s proposals focus on traditional "leftwing" issues. Some of those appear to have been lifted directly from the Communist Party's agenda (ref c). Its legislative proposals will include a progressive tax to benefit lower and middle-income wage workers, the establishment of a fair minimum wage, and a system of checks that opposition groups in the Duma could use to balance the power of the YR majority. SR also proposes better use of the Stabilization Fund, increased pensions, and a campaign against corruption.

¶10. (C) Babakov noted that, in contrast, YR has no legislative agenda. (Virtually all legislative initiatives originate in the Presidential Administration.) While supporting the President's emphasis on stability "in the political and economic sphere," Babakov labeled the current

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political monopoly "dangerous." SR would promote responsibility, not populism. In so doing, he predicted, SR would bleed support from the Communist Party, although he recognized that it would take time to wean Communist Party supporters from the "habit" of voting for Zyuganov.

Why &Just Russia8 Now?

¶11. (C) Several political analysts with whom we spoke see the creation of SR and Putin's sanction of it as an attempt to create a "managed democracy" and to challenge YR's monopoly on power, all while trying to revive the flagging interest of the electorate. Among our contacts, it was widely assumed that Mironov and SR are supported by Presidential Administration Deputy Igor Sechin and the so-called "siloviki" within the Kremlin, in addition to ex-FSB officials throughout the regions.

¶12. (SBU) Recent polling by the All-Russia Public Opinion Research Firm (VTsIOM) showed political elites, the intelligentsia, and some regional authorities receptive to SR. On the other hand, polling by The Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), an offshoot of VTsIOM, seems to show that

YR continues to command considerable support across social and economic strata. According to FOM,s research, except for a dip in popularity following the monetization of benefits in early 2005, YR's popularity has remained stable. Extensive media coverage and its relationship to Putin will only make it more popular, FOM contends.

&Just Russia's8 Future

¶13. (C) SR,s party leadership and analysts agree that the March 2007 regional elections will be the new party's proving ground. At a recent press conference, Babakov said that he thought that SR would have a good chance for success, which would lay the ground for what he predicted would be a majority in the December 2007 Duma elections. According to RPL insider Morozov, SR has a realistic chance of winning 30 - 40 percent of the votes in St. Petersburg and other RPL strongholds. Sergey Mikheyev, an expert on regional politics from the Center of Political Technologies (CPT), agreed that SR has the potential to attract approximately 50 percent of YR supporters, among whom are:

- those who voted for YR because of Putin's leadership;
- those who are disenchanted by YR bureaucracy and inefficiency;
- those who support specific issues which YR has failed to address or has addressed inappropriately;
- and finally those who joined YR because of its connections to the Kremlin.

Comment

¶14. (C) While SR is attempting to publicly position itself as a social democratic alternative to the more conservative United Russia, it is ultimately power and control of the Kremlin --not ideology-- that is important to its leadership.

In that sweepstakes, United Russia clearly retains the upper hand, as the large number of prominent politicians who attended YR's December 2 convention in Yekaterinburg attests.

While President Putin has "blessed" the formation of SR, it appears that the Kremlin has done little to assist the party as it attempts to gain a foothold, and it is not clear that Mironov alone has the ability to do that heavy lifting. He has not, for example, had the means to impose his will on the regional leaderships of the three constituent parties as they squabble over jobs in the newly-constituted party, and SR's only notable recent addition to its short roster of prominent party personalities has been figure skater Yevgeniy Plyushchenko, who will reportedly occupy SR's third slot, after Mironov and a number two who has not yet been named.

¶15. (C) Still, some observers see SR's difficulties in the regions as part of the inevitable birth pangs of a new party, and they point to what they say is YR's vigorous response at its December 2 convention as evidence that the reigning Kremlin party is not taking its newly-minted rival for granted.

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